The Definition of Insanity

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by Anonymous

Summary

While on patrol one night, Will gets an unusual call.

Notes

Not sure how to summarize/tag the story without completely giving it away.

Nothing good ever happened after two in the morning.

Of everything Will had learned after his first year on the force, it was the one thing he could say with absolute certainty and the only thing they had failed to mention at the academy - that anything called in past two was bound to be bad, and not bad in the casual, half-assed kind of way either, but bad in the sense of a full-blown crisis. Will had faith in this and not much else, so much so that now, whenever his radio buzzed with an incoming call in the early hours of his tour, his mouth would go instantly dry, a reverse Pavlov's dog, just knowing that sure as the sun would rise in a few hours time, disaster was looming just on the horizon.

Quiet nights were bad omens too, because these were the nights that the worst kinds of mistakes were made, when situations that should be easily and quickly contained were suddenly drawn out and messy affairs. Will had learned to be wary of unnaturally silent radios and hours that crawled slowly and uneventfully by, knowing that somewhere in the stillness, catastrophes were lining up like lottery numbers just waiting to be dropped. That when shit finally did hit the fan, it would hit it hard.

Tonight had been a quiet night. Too quiet for a mid-summer night in New Orleans, when crime was always at its peak. But so far, he'd had nothing but a few routine traffic stops on an otherwise silent tour.

Will didn't like it. Like a dog that could sense a hurricane brewing miles from the coast, it raised his hackles for reasons he couldn't quite explain, and he drummed his fingers anxiously against the chipped grain of the table, body wound tight as a piano string ready to snap. When the waitress suddenly appeared at his elbow, he jerked with a gasp, coffee sloshing over the rim and down the sides of his half-filled mug. The waitress pulled a rag from her apron, but Will ignored her, embarrassed, and grabbed a fistful of napkins to mop up his mess before she has the chance to do it for him.

"Sorry," He mutters, sparing her just enough of a glance to see her gentle smile, but not quite able to meet her eyes, afraid of what he'd find there.

"Rough night, hon?" She asks kindly, reaching over and re-filling his cup, as though nothing had happened, and Will is grateful for that.

"Always," Will manages with a smile he's sure looked every bit as forced as it actually is. He wonders if it it is at all possible to have a single conversation, a single interaction with another human being, that isn't awkward, though he seriously doubts it.

"I'll bet," The waitress practically coos. Will risks another glance, this time at the nametag pinned to the front of her shirt. Sally. "All due respect, hon, you look like you just graduated high school."

It's a sore spot, but Will can't resent her for poking it without meaning to. He knows as well as anyone that he's about as intimidating as a kicked puppy, and a pretty far cry from what most people picture when they think of law enforcement. Hell, Will's pretty sure he would have been laughed out of the recruitment office on sight alone if it wasn't for his test scores.

"I'm older than I look, I promise."

He's not. He's twenty. He enrolled two years ago, the day after he graduated. Not quite as young as she might think, but hardly anyone's idea of a seasoned cop, not even his own. He knows Sally doesn't believe him, but he sees her head bob from the corner of his eye.

"Wish I could say the same," She chuckles. "Me, I look exactly like my age, and that's older than hell."

"You're not old." Will tells her, his smile thawing into something a little more genuine.

"Aren't you sweet." Sally says cheerfully, but somewhere underneath the happy veneer, there's a sadness that runs deep, and Will feels like he owes it to her to see her, to really see her, for everything that she is, and he finally forces himself to meet her eyes.

The pendulum swings...

Late-fifties. Ashy blonde hair swept back into a messy bun, a few escaped wisps framing her thin face. The lines around her eyes and mouth are deeper than they should be - smoker? Yes, if the stained fingers wrapped around the coffee pot are anything to go by. But also stress. Will can feel it rolling off her, pounding against him like waves crashing against the sand, slowly eating it away, bit by bit. Her husband's cancer is back, and it's lodged itself deeper inside him this time around. The tests keep coming back with more bad news, the medical bills keep piling up, far more than anything she can afford, but she'll happily dig herself into debt if it means saving him because she'd do anything to save him, the fear of being alone, of losing him, threatening to pull her down, down, down until she feels she can barely breathe -

Will comes back to himself abruptly, feeling like he's choking and knowing he only feels that way because she feels that way, despite her best efforts to hide it. He sucks in a breath, and cradles his head in his hands. Beside him, Sally hesitates, fingers hovering uncertainly over his shoulder.

"You okay, hon?"

"I'm fine." Will tells her, closing his eyes. He can't risk looking at her again, not after everything he's just seen, but he wants to tell her not to be afraid, that being alone's not so bad, and that you get used to it...but he just can't bring himself to say it, not now when everything's still so raw.

"I'll go get you some water." Sally tells him, hand rubbing up and down his back just once before she turns away. Will doesn't move, doesn't acknowledge her departure in any way, just continues to sit there, slowly drawing deep pulls of air into his lungs and trying to ignore the sticky moisture that's beading the back of his neck, soaking into the fabric of his collar, the way his hands are shaking.
Will knows by now he shouldn't look, has learned to avoid eye contact at all costs because he knows how overwhelming and painful it can be, but sometimes he just can't help himself. Sometimes, the pain that comes from looking is better than the pain of being alone.

'We drink the poison our minds pour for us and wonder why we feel so sick.' He finds himself thinking with a wry smile.

'Well you would know all about that, wouldn't you?' Whispers the small dark part of himself he's spent his whole life trying to carve out and bury. The words were strangely lilted in his head, a voice that's not his, but still familiar somehow. 'Your mind is nothing but poison and always has been.'

'Yes,' Will agrees miserably, knowing he can lie to just about anyone but himself. 'Certainly no arguing there.'

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Will had never normal, but just what exactly was wrong with him, no one could ever quite say for sure.

He had been a serious child, quiet and painfully shy and eerily perceptive in a way that made grown-ups feel vaguely unsettled, but never enough for them do anything about it other than shrug.

"He's just a little sensitive." Soothed the old lady next door when Will sobbed inconsolably over a wounded baby bird he'd found in her yard.

"Out of the mouths of babes." Chuckled one of the his daddy's friends when Will suddenly announced that the reason their boss drank so much was because he wasn't happy with his wife.

"You'll grow out of it." His father would say, holding Will close when he would wake, screaming and shaking, in the middle of the night.

Will had believed them all, believed that these things were normal and would eventually come to pass, that these emotions and thoughts that would suddenly seize him without warning, this understanding he seemed to have that no one else did, were just growing pains, things that would be shed from him like baby teeth, like everyone said.

His childhood had been a lonely one, drifting up and down the Atlantic coast with his father, never staying in one place for too long and never much opportunity to make friends, but he had been happy in the simple ways children are happy.

His father bought him donuts every Saturday morning for breakfast, and together they would sit on the docks, watching the sun rise over the ocean and licking the icing from their fingers. He had learned to string a fishing pole before he'd learned to tie his shoes, and could remember watching the colorful bobber as it floated among the reeds of Lake Pontchartrain, his daddy humming 'The Parting Glass' beside him. He had spent his days wandering the boatyards while his daddy worked nearby, and sometimes he would let Will help. There was nothing that delighted him more than to hand his father the screwdriver from his toolbox, or to just sit and listen to him explain the parts of the boat engine. At night, he would fall asleep

in the car to the sounds of classic rock, and if he managed to stay awake during the ride home, he would catch fireflies until it was time to come inside.

It wasn't until Will had started kindergarten and his father finally had the chance to compare Will to what other children were like that it became irrefutably clear that something was very, very wrong.
Will could still remember sitting in his father's lap at the pediatrician's office, hiding his face in his daddy's broad chest. He had been been scared because he'd thought he was getting a shot, and his daddy had been scared because he was worried there was something wrong, and the doctor had been worried because she could tell there was something wrong, but she didn't know exactly what.

"-kind of looks like autism, but in some ways it very clearly isn't." She had said, fingers twisting nervously in her lap. She had been young, only a few years out of medical school and terrified of making a mistake. "To be honest, Mr. Graham, I'm not really sure what this is. It might be better if you talked to a specialist about it."

His father had stiffened slightly at those words, and Will could do little more than whimper and absorb the maelstrom of anxiety that swirled around him - the worry that there was something wrong, the worry about just what it was, how to fix it, if it could be fixed, how his daddy was going to afford to take him to the specialist and the treatments he might need.

What followed was a battery of tests and retests, doctors' office visits, and referrals. Every time his daddy got a new job, they would have to start over again in a new city, and yet no one seemed to know just exactly what was wrong with Will. They ruled out adrenoleukodystrophy pretty quickly, as well as childhood schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Most believed it was autism, though they could never agree on what type, and a few had postulated a behavior disorder of some kind, but no matter what treatment they suggested, nothing seemed to help the emotional outbursts that continued to plague Will.

"I'm going to be honest with you, Mr. Graham," The last specialist, Dr. Campbell, had said, shaking his head as he pulled off his reading glasses. "I really don't know what this is - I've never seen anything like it. Physically, there's absolutely nothing wrong with him. But mentally and emotionally, psychologically, the results are all over the place." He shook his head again, and glanced over at Will, who avoided his eyes. He always felt like a butterfly pinned to a corkboard when the doctors looked at him like that. "Have any of your previous doctors suggested an MRI?"

MRIs had been around for a few years now, and while most insurance companies were still loathe to pick up the tab, Dr. Campbell somehow managed to pull some strings to ensure it was covered for them completely.

Will was nervous when the nurse lifted him up onto the bed, even though he'd been reassured again and again that he wouldn't feel a thing and his father would be standing right next to him. When they turned the machine on, Will startled at the loud noises that followed, and felt his daddy's hand wrap reassuringly around his ankle, reminding him he has to stay still. He was relieved when it was finally over, and hoped he'd never have to do it again, but of course the second Dr. Campbell saw the results, he wanted to stick Will back inside. Because what

the MRI machine revealed sent shockwaves through the psychiatric community and would follow Will for the rest of his life.

Dr. Campbell rambled about the density of mirror neurons Will had (more than double that of the average person), the size and shape of his amygdala, and the connective pathways of his cerebral cortex for what felt like forever before Will's daddy finally lost his patience and asked him to put it simply.

"What it means, Mr. Graham," Dr. Campbell explained, voice quivering with excitement, "is that we are looking at the first documented case of an empathy disorder."

"Empathy disorder?" His daddy had echoed, sounding puzzled. "What, you're saying he just understands what people are feeling?"

"It's more than that," Dr. Campbell said, "It's not just that he understands what people feel, Mr. Graham, it's that he takes on their emotions as if they were his own."

It's taken four years and dozens of strangers poking and prodding Will to get this diagnosis, and something about it feels hollow. Will has realized by now that the emotions he feels - the ones that seize him so suddenly and without warning - are not actually his but someone else's, and has gotten a lot better at controlling his outbursts. His father is even less impressed.

"So...there's nothing actually wrong with him?" He had drawled with a single raised eyebrow.

"No, not wrong with him, no," Dr. Campbell said quickly. "But as far as I know, this has never been seen before-"

His daddy declined a follow up appointment. They'd gotten their diagnosis, and he'd been reassured it's nothing life-threatening, though Dr. Campbell warned him that it may be detrimental to Will's wellbeing in the long run. Though how, exactly, he can't say. Will was glad to know his daddy won't put him through any more tests, but he couldn't help but be worried all the same.

"Are you upset?" He had asked on the drive home.

"Upset? What for?"

"Because there's something wrong with me."

His daddy snorted. "There's nothing wrong with you."

"There is," Will had insisted. "I'm not normal like the other kids-"

"There ain't no such thing as 'normal'," His father had said firmly. "Don't go thinking that about yourself, boy."

Will was quiet for a long while, working up the courage to ask what he's been wondering for quite some time. "Did mom leave 'cause of me?"

There was a sharp intake of breath from his daddy, just as there always is whenever Will asked about his mother, and a brief pause before he said, so quietly that Will almost didn't hear, "No, baby. She didn't leave because of you."

Life goes on. Dr. Campbell published his findings on Will (or "John Doe" as he's referred to in the paper) and, as predicted, it takes the scientific world by storm. Nearly everybody clamors for the chance to pick Will apart, to pull back the curtain and see exactly what it is that makes him tick. The more ambitious ones somehow manage to uncover Will's real name and contact information, which circulates through their various circles like a virus. Psychologists, neuroscientists, geneticists, evolutionary and behavioral biologists, and all manner of everything else in between, call, begging to meet Will or to ask him to participate in a study they're conducting, and all with promises that the Grahams will be generously compensated for their troubles.

Will balks at every offer.

"No." He says stubbornly each time his father tells him that another professor or researcher has called. His childhood was filled with enough shrinks to last him a lifetime, and he has no intention of ever seeking out their services again if he can help it. His daddy just nods when Will refuses, and it isn't until a call from a particularly tactless psychiatrist (who assures his daddy repeatedly that he can "fix" Will for him) that his father finally decides to get a new number.

"Ain't nothing to fix." He snaps before hanging up. "There's nothing wrong with him."

There is, though. Will still has trouble making friends at school. Still has nightmares and will occasionally blurt out some uncomfortable truth without meaning to. But he appreciates his daddy defending him all the same.

Life goes on, and for all that's changed, not much has. Will continues to follow his father from one job to the next, across state lines from one end of the coast to the other. They go fishing on weekends and during the summer, when Will's not in school, he tags along to the docks. His daddy teaches him about boats and shows him how to fix them, and when Will masters the basics, the two of them share a beer, watching the sun as it sets over the horizon in companionable silence. They're each is all the other has in the world, and it's never more obvious than in the quiet moments like these.

When the school year starts and Will is once again alone for the majority of the day, he checks out books from the library on criminology and psychology and philosophy and reads them by the beam of his flashlight late into the night. Because even though he understands by now that the thoughts he has aren't often his own, he can't help but wonder just who is Will Graham? If Will is a living, breathing mirror of what other people are, does he even exist? Is Will Graham capable of independent thought and feeling? Is there anything that's truly his? Or is he just the product of other people's influence? Rene Descartes encourages him ("I think, therefore I am."), but Carl Jung leaves Will more unsure than ever ("You always become the thing you fight most.").

Because he still sometimes catches himself mimicking other people's accents by accident, and still has violent, blood-soaked nightmares he can't explain. And more and more often,

Will is confronted with a darkness that lingers somewhere deep inside him that never seems to dissipate like the other emotions he picks up. And it terrifies him because no matter how hard he tries to ignore it, to swallow it down and drown it, it's still there, shimmering just below the surface, ice cold and angry, violent and ruthless, and it's getting harder and harder to convince himself that these feelings aren't actually his.
"If you comprehend the darkness, it seizes you." Carl Jung writes. "It comes over you like the night with black shadows and countless shimmering stars. Silence and peace come over you if you begin to comprehend the darkness. Only he who does not comprehend the darkness fears the night."

Except Will doesn't want to embrace this darkness. He doesn't want it at all. He just wants to be normal. His daddy says normal doesn't exist, but according to the Oxford Dictionary, "Insanity (noun) is a state of being which prevents normal perception, behavior, or social interaction", so there must be some measure of normalcy that Will clearly doesn't achieve, and he resents it.

He withdraws further into himself, learns to avoid people and eyes, and protects what's his fiercely and jealously ("Above all else, guard your heart, for from it, all things flow", cautions the Bible). And when he finally graduates high school and it comes time for Will to decide what to do with the rest of his life, he fills out an application for the New Orleans Police Department.

"A cop?" His father squawks when Will tells him that he's been accepted, apparently much less amused than Will is to discover that the police are in fact hiring kicked puppies onto the force. "The hell you mean a cop? You trying to get yourself killed, boy?!"

Will tells him he wants to be a cop because he wants to help people, and he tells himself he wants to be a cop because he's a good person, capable of more empathy than literally anyone else on the face of the planet...but he knows in his heart it's because the darkness that's festering inside him is like a cancer and it needs an outlet and an outlet soon, and Will is hoping that the everyday violence that comes with being a cop can provide it.

It does.

And then some.

Will has more opportunity to let his darkness run wild than he ever could have imagined - with the state's stamped approval no less, bequeathed to him in the form of a shiny badge - and still Will hesitates. Because a part of him wonders if it will only feed his darkness. If he shoots this suspect, beats this perp, will it appease the violence he craves...or will it only leave him wanting more? It's a liability that costs him his partner on more than one occasion, and it eventually catches the attention of his captain.

"Fifth guy in six months who won't work with you." Grunts his boss from behind his desk, eyeing Will suspiciously. "That's a new unit record, Graham. Means you're either a Grade-A-Asshole or people don't trust you to have their back. So which is it?"

Will can only shrug. Because what kind of fucked up existence is he living that the better answer is to admit that he's an asshole rather than that he can't be trusted? Neither answer will

do him any favors, and either way, Will is assigned to desk duty each time someone quits on him. In a city as big and crime-ridden as New Orleans, it's too great a risk to send someone out on the streets without back up, and until they can find some poor sap who's willing to ride with Will, the NOPD won't let him on patrol. He's frustrated and ashamed every time it happens - it makes him feel like a child again, struggling to make friends. Except back then, he had known he was doing something wrong, he just didn't understand exactly what it was. Now it's worse, because he knows what he's doing wrong, and he knows how to fix it, but he can't (or won't) do what needs to be done to fix it.

The hours behind the desk drag by, and Will distracts himself from the long days with cold case files, eyes dragging tiredly back and forth across the old typewritten print, memorizing the details of the scene and the evidence collected. And it's here in the sweltering heat of the records room that he discovers another facet of his empathy disorder he's never had the chance to experience before - that he can take information and extrapolate it, recreating not only the scene of the crime but the mindset of the criminal in that moment as well. In the dark caverns of Will's mind, the voices of killers whisper seductively to him, stitch their desires to his, and shadowy faces of these monsters become startlingly clear. After much pleading and arguing on his part, and the threat of losing his job on his superiors', Will manages to convince the homicide chief to reopen one of the investigations...and an arrest is made a few days later.

When he tells his father that the NOPD has decided to pay for night classes at the local college, his daddy is over the moon with pride, and tells anyone who will listen that his boy is going to get a degree in criminal justice. He reminds Will every chance he gets that he's the first in their family to go to college and what this means, all the opportunities that he'll now have, all the things he can have that his father could never give him.

"You gave me everything I could ever want." Will says, and wonders if the sadness he feels is his own or his father's, if he's upset because his father thinks he's failed him or because his father knows he failed him.

"Just take care of yourself," His father begs him. "You've got your whole life ahead of you, boy, and you have the chance to really make something of yourself."

"I know, Daddy." Will tells him dutifully. "I'll be careful."

Will gets a call early one morning from a hospital in Baton Rogue, and learns from a stranger over the phone that his father collapsed shortly after clocking in for his shift. That paramedics had rushed him to the emergency room, and the doctors there had worked on him for nearly forty minutes, but they weren't able to save him. His daddy was gone.

He wasn't going to get to see Will graduate after all.

Will arranges for his body to be brought to New Orleans. He's heard before that home is where you want to be buried, but he never thought to ask his father where this was for him. He'd only asked his daddy where their home was, if they even had one at all, and his daddy had tugged him close under his arm.

"My home is wherever you are." He'd said at the time. And since Will is living in New Orleans now, he supposes that makes it his father's home, his final resting place, as well.

On the day he buries his father, he's both surprised and touched by just how many people show up, how far some of them have come to say their goodbyes. He doesn't speak, just nods silently, when they tell him that they're sorry, that his father was a good man, and that how proud his father was of him. He bites his lip when they toast his father's memory and he stays long after everyone else has gone. And when they have, and the sadness lingers, Will finally allows himself to cry.

He cries because he's relieved to know that the despair he feels, so raw and deep and all-consuming that it threatens to swallow him whole, is his own. He cries because the love he felt for his father was real, and not merely a reflection of his father's love for him. He cries because his father's gone and he misses him and it hurts.

And he cries because he's now really and truly alone in the world. He had always known he would be eventually, but now that it's finally here, he finds it's come way too soon and he isn't ready for it.

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The bell chimes and the door slams. Will blinks, glances around the diner and finds it empty and silent. The clock on the wall tells him it's half past two in the morning, and the night sky beyond the windows seems wickedly black, not a star in sight. Will shifts uncomfortably in his seat, still nervous for reasons he can't quite explain, and finds himself studying the diner in an effort to distract himself from the anxious thrumming of his heart.

It's a gaudy sort of place, checkered tile, chrome barstools bolted along the long wooden countertop, red vinyl booths and powder blue walls. It's precisely the sort of thing that tourists make a point to avoid (though with just a few beads and fleur-de-lisse, maybe an alligator skull or two, they'd come flocking), and that locals tend to favor in more reasonable hours, which suits Will just fine. He has the place to himself and without the constant onslaught of other people's thoughts and emotions to drown his own, it's the first time all day he can breathe easy and hear himself think. He lets his eyes wander freely and aimlessly, without the fear of meeting someone else's gaze and seeing far more than he's bargained for.

The walls are adorned with black and white photographs of jazz musicians and Mardi Gras parades, Louis Armstrong and Allen Toussaint records, and Louisiana license plates. He catches a glimpse of himself in the large mirror that hangs behind the register - unnaturally pale, bruise-like circles under his eyes - and looks quickly away (like he needs to be reminded any more what a mess he is). Directly across from him there's a corkboard littered with colorful advertisements for guitar lessons, guided walking tours, yoga classes, bourbon tasting and...Will stills. A poster for the history museum, featuring a traveling exhibit of...Hannibal the Conqueror....

Will stares up at the poster, frowning slightly at the bold, black print.

"Hannibal," He finds himself murmuring, almost reverently, before he realizes what he's doing and presses his lips tightly together. He scowls, forces himself to look away...and then glances back again, drawn like a moth to a flame.

It's important somehow. Really important. Why is it so important? He knows but he doesn't know. The answer is right there, right on the tip of his tongue, just out of reach...Maybe if he stares a little longer, thinks a little harder, it will come to him.

The poster features the stone bust of what Will assumes is Hannibal the Conqueror. He's not entirely sure. He can barely remember who Hannibal the Conqueror was - though he's pretty sure he has something to do with ancient Rome - but for some reason, he's convinced the face glaring back at him is the wrong one...

...What the hell's that supposed to mean? He's being ridiculous. It's a poster for a museum exhibit. For a man who's been dead for thousands of years and one he knows nothing about and could care even less. He has no intention of going. He doesn't find it even remotely interesting.

(You will.)

Will jerks with the force that the thought hits him, sits there panting long after it's gone. He knows voice. He has to, distinct as it is. Doesn't he? He would remember that voice...wouldn't he? And he's sure he's heard those words before, he knows he has. Except...no. No, it's not that he's heard them before - it's that he hasn't heard them yet.

Will groans and massages the bridge of his nose in some vain attempt to ease the headache that's building behind his eyes. He's clearly tired. No, more like exhausted. He barely slept the night before, the same way he barely sleeps most nights. Between work and school, studying for mid-terms, writing reports and answering non-stop emergency calls, it's no wonder the stress it catching up to him. And it's not like his catch-all brain is doing him any favors, either. Most days he's just glad (and amazed) he's still on the better side of sanity.

He's not sure how long he sits there, pointedly ignoring the poster and instead memorizing the patterns in the wood grain table top, but his heart rate has finally slowed from an uncomfortable staccato to something a bit more manageable. Not a soul has wandered into the diner the entire time, and the only sound Will hears is his own soft breathing. He tries to convince himself it's a peaceful stillness, exactly the sort of thing you'd expect in the strange, late hours that hover between nightfall and daybreak, but it's a lie and he knows it.

A quick glance at that clock again tells him it's now closer to three (the witching hour, his brain is quick to helpfully point out), and Will wonders if he should be moving on. There's still a few hours to go before his tour officially ends, and though the night has been suspiciously uneventful so far, he knows a lot can happen in almost no time at all. And besides. Maybe once he starts moving, patrolling again, he can distract himself from the unease that's been hovering over him like a shroud.

He's only just made the decision when his radio suddenly chirps, and Will feels his stomach sink.

"Graham, what's your twenty?"

He watches his hand as it rises, fingers reaching for the microphone clipped to his shoulder, and feels strangely detached from himself, as if his hand and the fingers attached are not really his own.

"Napoleon Avenue." He answers robotically. There's a burst of static before the dispatcher speaks again.

"We got a call about a possible 10-14 in the Garden District." The voice crackles over the line. It sounds bored, and Will can picture what the past few hours have been like - small cubicle, a headset digging painfully into the side of their skull, the computer screen near blinding in the dim light. Quiet, uneventful, the hours dragging, and the first call he's received all night is not a robbery or a murder or anything remotely exciting but a prowler that the caller isn't even completely sure exists. Will borrows this boredom for himself, lets it wash over the vague terror that's been chasing him all night and melt it away like lidocaine numbing an open wound.

"I'll look into it," He promises, disinterest bleeding into his tone as he pushes himself to his feet. Dispatch rattles off the address, and Will is once again met with the ringing silence of the diner. It's only then, when he glances down and realizes that Sally has never brought him his bill - has never brought him the water she promised - that it hits Will just how unnatural the stillness really is. Because the entire time he's been sitting here by himself, it occurs to him that he's never once heard the gentle murmur of the staff speaking to one another, or the humming of the air conditioner, or the clinking of china and cutlery through the window that separates Will from the kitchen. It's a quiet that's so absolute that it's just shy of palpable, and for one wild moment, Will thinks he might actually be the only one here. But he quickly bats the thought aside with a scoff. It's a twenty-four hour diner and it's three o'clock in the morning - if there's ever a time he can expect a lull in activity, it would surely be now. He tells himself this, and it's sound logic, a perfectly reasonable thing to say...but there's a part of him that doesn't believe it. So with a bravado that he doesn't really feel, he calls out loudly, "Sally?"

There's no answer. The silence that follows is so empty and cavernous that it echoes, and Wills shifts uneasily in its wake.

"Sally?" He tries again, pulse quickening under his skin.

Nothing.

With a muttered curse, Will digs into his pockets. Pulls out a few crumpled bills for the coffee he's been nursing for nearly an hour and sets it under his empty mug before turning to leave.

And as he does, as he's turning away toward the door, he catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror behind the register, and his lungs seize with horror, breath catching in his throat.

Because there's a second, less than a second, that the face looking back isn't his, but a sallow, waxy mask, receding hairline, clouded, dead eyes...Wills jumps reflexively back, collides with the table, which scrapes loudly along the tile floor, but when he looks again, this time really looks, he sees only himself.

For a long moment, Will stands there panting, gazing at his pale and wide-eyed reflection, heart hammering against his chest like a bird throwing itself against the bars of its cage. Then he tentatively brings up a shaking hand and pushes his sweaty hair from his face, forces himself to look away.

It's nothing, he tells himself again as he strides out the door and down the street. He's just tired. But he keeps his head ducked, avoiding the polished window fronts that line his way, footsteps loud against the pavement. The air is heavy and tastes faintly like rain. He wonders if there's a storm coming as he unlocks his cruiser with shaking hands and slides inside, trying not to think about what he just saw. What he knows he just saw and what he's trying to convince himself that he didn't. He starts the car, feels the cool air rush over him. Doesn't check his mirrors before he pulls out. He's fine. He tells himself, again and again and again. He's fine. Everything's fine. He's just tired. There's nothing wrong with him. But even so, he can't help but remember an article he read in 'Psychology Today'.

Insanity. Noun. A mental illness of such severe nature that a person cannot distinguish fantasy from reality.

Will doesn't think it's the best definition that exists, but he has to admit, it damn-well gets the point across.

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It's just one turn off Napoleon to St. Charles Avenue, and from there it's a straight shot all the way down to the Garden District. St. Charles is probably New Orleans' second most iconic road (the first of course being the infamous disaster shit show known as Bourbon Street), and Will can remember taking the streetcar line down this same route once when he was five years old, just a few weeks before that fateful visit to the pediatrician. He had been swinging his legs as he watched the world roll by, softly singing "The Parting Glass" to himself between sips of his soda. When he finally figured out the lyrics Will was so busy butchering, his daddy had chuckled fondly and ruffled his hair.

Looking back on it now, most of the ride is blur. It's only when they reached the Garden District, and Will saw the wrought iron fences, white columns, and second story balconies that his memories suddenly sharpen. He can remember sitting up straighter, leaning out the window and staring open-mouthed as they passed under a canopy of oak trees.

"Wow!" He whispered, amazed that something so grand could actually exist. "Do people live there?"

Will and his daddy don't really live anywhere. They usually rent an apartment for a few months before his father gets a new job and they have to move somewhere else. There was one time they had a house, but it was nowhere near as big as these. And none of these places actually belong to them. They belong to someone else and they're just borrowing them for a little bit. That's why they have to be so careful not to damage anything and why Will can't paint his bedroom walls his favorite color. Will knows this isn't exactly normal, and that other people live in the same place for years or even their whole lives. But Will doesn't mind if they're not normal- he's never known anything else, and as long they're together, he doesn't care where they live.

His daddy steadied him, his big hand fisting the back of his tee shirt. "Hard to believe, huh, bud?"

"Maybe one day we can live here." Will didn't notice his father wince at his words, and he didn't understand why he suddenly felt so sad and embarrassed. It's only now, looking back after all this time, that Will finally realizes the shame he'd felt was his father's and not his own.

The road may be the same, but Will barely recognizes it now, alone and in the dead of night and heading toward what may be a disaster in the making. As he rolls slowly past, squinting at house numbers, Will wonders if he should call for backup. Though he doesn't have a partner, the NOPD has figured out by now that Will doesn't play well with others, and that if they keep insisting that he stays behind a desk until someone volunteers to ride with him, then he'll likely be stuck behind a desk forever. It's a waste they know they can't afford, and have agreed to let Will patrol alone, on the condition that he take every precaution he possibly can. Will had only barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes when he agreed, and most days makes a point to avoid asking for help even when he knows he probably should. But now, as he finally pulls up to the correct house, Will wonders if he might finally be over his head.

The wrought iron fence is high and rusted and set in a low brick wall. The yard is so overgrown that Will can barely see the house through the wild tangle of shrubs and Spanish moss. For a few minutes, he sits there squinting. How anyone could have seen someone prowling around in there is beyond him, and, frustrated, he throws the car in drive and slowly circles the block. The house sits on a corner, and as he comes around to the back, Will is surprised to see a light in one of the second story windows. It's not the flickering, soft glow of a flame, but a bright, white light, cold and steady. Will blinks, staring up at it, wondering where it's coming from. What little he can see of the house is so incredibly derelict that it obviously hasn't been occupied in quite some time - the power was probably shut off at least a decade ago...so where's the light coming from? It's not moving, so it's not a flashlight...maybe a lantern of some sort?

Will heaves a sigh. Probably not a prowler, but he can easily imagine a homeless person sheltering in there for the night. Or maybe a drug addict camped out inside, riding out their high.

Except...the Garden District is one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in New Orleans. Surely, whoever's in there would have realized the light would attract attention...wouldn't they?

Will loops around the block again, and parks in front of the house, where the front gate stands suspiciously wide open. His fingers hover hesitatingly over his radio microphone, debating if he should call for back-up, but in the end, he decides against it.

Will winces when he slams the cruiser's door shut and the sound echoes down the street, as if announcing his arrival. He shoots it a glare, feeling betrayed, but falters when he catches sight of his reflection in the window.

Because splayed across his cheek, stretching nearly from his ear to the corner of his mouth, is a scar. It's a wicked, ugly thing, carved deep into his flesh, and Will raises his hand hesitatingly to trace the ridge of puckered flesh that divides the right side of his face.

'How?' He finds himself thinking weakly. 'When...?'

'You've had that for a long time now,' His brain reminds him helpfully. 'Don't you remember how bad it hurt when you got it? How bad it still aches when it rains?'

'Yes,' Will thinks, a little desperately. He remembers now the white hot pain as his skin was torn savagely apart, ripped open, the taste of copper on his tongue as his mouth filled with blood.
But what he can't recall, no matter how hard he tries, is how he got it.

He doesn't realize he's shaking, can't feel how hard his fingers are digging into his skin until the thin barrier bursts and blood swells under his nails. Will forces himself to turn away as the warm rivulets trail lazily down, forces himself to stop thinking about the terrible scar he carries but can't remember getting.

'It doesn't matter.' He thinks firmly as he strides toward the waiting house. 'It doesn't matter. It's not like you can take it back. It's a part of you now...'

He slips soundlessly through the open gate, fumbling for his flashlight once he's inside. The trees hang so heavy overhead that they blot out the streetlamps and the moon, and the paved path is so overgrown with weeds that Will has to sweep his light back and forth a few times before he finds it. His feet catch on stray vines and branches scrabble at his clothes and face as Will picks his way cautiously forward to the front porch. When he climbs the steps, the rotted wood groans loudly under his weight.

The front door stands just slightly ajar, cracked just enough to be inviting, just enough to be a warning, and it swings silently back into the darkness of the house when Will pushes it further open. He can't see anything beyond the beam of his light, can't see so much as a hint of what lies beyond the shadows inside the house. Will bites back a curse and raises his flashlight higher.

"NOPD!" He calls loudly, amazed that he sounds as calm as he does, considering how hard and fast his heart is beating. "We got a call about a possible burglary! Is everything okay?"

There's no answer, not even the faint sound of footsteps or people fumbling in the dark. Will sweeps his flashlight back and forth. The floor is strewn with a thick carpet of dead leaves, which crunch softly as he steps over the threshold and moves further into the house. The

paint is peeling and the walls are dotted with black mold. Hanging from the eaves and an old chandelier, he can see ropy strands of cobwebs. There's the strong scent of decay, something that reminds Will of the brackish water of the bayou. He coughs, studies the heavy layer of dust that lies undisturbed across every visible surface. It looks as if no one has been inside the house in years. He takes another step forward, and as he does, he hears the unmistakable sound of a floorboard creaking directly overhead.

Will whips his head up at the sound, and by the beam of his flashlight, he sees a few dust motes float gently down. Will's heart is in his throat, and he quickly switches his light to his left hand so he can grab his gun.

"Hello?" He shouts, moving slowly toward the staircase, bracing his gun as best he can and holding the flashlight so it's pointed directly in front of him. "NOPD! Come out with your hands up!"

He doesn't expect an answer as he climbs the stairs to the second floor, and he's not disappointed. It's only when he's reached the landing that Will finally hears something, and it takes him a long moment to realize it's the low, mournful sound of a piano playing. Will shudders, trying to pinpoint where it's coming from, and picks his way down the hall, following the song as it grows steadily louder and louder, until he finds himself before a set of great white doors, stretching up from the floor to the ceiling and shockingly pristine and preserved compared to the rest of the house. The same bright light he'd seen outside is shining through the gap under the door. He's breathing hard and heavy, impossibly loud, and he's sure whoever's behind the door can hear him - how couldn't they? Will knows he should turn around right now. Go back out to his car and call for back-up, and wait there until it arrives, but he finds himself rooted to floor, paralyzed, unable to move either forward or back. It's only after he's stood there for a few moments, shaking and gasping for breath, that he finally recognizes the melody that's playing. Will stiffens, gazing up at the doors in wonder as "The Parting Glass" continues to filter past them.

How many times had he heard his father sing that song under his breath as he worked? Or drum his fingers absentmindedly to the rhythm as he read the morning paper, looking for jobs? How long had it taken Will to learn the words, how many times had his daddy corrected him over the years before he finally had it memorized by heart?

("But since it fell into my lot, that I should rise and you should not, I'll gently rise and softly call, good night and joy be with you all.")

He hasn't heard the song in years, and hearing it now, the icy terror holding him in place suddenly loosens. Will takes a stumbling step forward before it has the chance to seize him again, and throws open the doors.

The room beyond is not at all what he expected - the floors are polished hardwood and the walls are paneled and painted a soft, welcoming cream. There's furniture tucked under crisp white drapes, and an imposing fireplace stands bare and cold across the room. Beside it, there's another door that's open, however slightly, and filtering through the crack is the light he'd seen from outside, the light he's followed here, which bathes the room in a gentle glow. And at the center of the room sits an antique piano, intricately carved and inlaid with mother-

of-pearl. Though it's worn and chipped in more than a few places, the notes rise from its vibrating strings with ease and shiver delicately in the air before they fade away.

It's a beautiful room, filled with beautiful things, but all Will sees is the man sitting at the piano bench. He can't see his face - he's turned away from Will - but his hair is thick and dark, flecked with gray. He's wearing worn jeans, old boots, and a weather-beaten, stained jacket, and he smells like whiskey and oil. The longer Will stares, the more tightly his throat closes, collapsing on itself, as he watches the man's hand drift vaguely over the piano keys, hardly daring to believe what he's seeing.

'It can't be,' He finds himself thinking numbly, 'It can't be...'

"Daddy?" He croaks, the thick, Louisiana drawl, the one he's worked so hard to lose, coming back full force as though it never left. Abruptly, the man stops playing, and he whips around to glare at Will, who gasps to find himself once again pinned beneath his father's iron gaze.

"The hell are you?" He snaps. It's breathtaking what these words mean, how much the words hurt, and for a moment, Will can only stand there, choking on air.

"Daddy, it's me." He says when he finally finds his voice again. "It's me, Will."

His father studies him, and despite the fact that he's still glaring, he seems confused, like he's not quire sure what he's seeing. "No, you're not."

It feels like a punch to the gut, and to his horror, Will can feel hot tears prickling his eyes. 'Don't cry,' He thinks wildly. 'For God's sake, don't cry, not now.'

'It's me, Daddy, I swear." He says. He holsters his gun with shaking fingers and takes a few steps forward. "Please believe me. It's Will."

His father still looks confused, eyebrows knit together as Will moves closer, and it's only once he's stepped into the light that he finally seems to realize who he's looking at. His frown inverts, splits into a wide, warm smile.

"Will!" He breathes. He rises quickly from the bench and moves to grab Will's shoulders. "It is you, isn't it? Boy, what's happened to you?"

"What do you mean?" Will asks, hand drifting self-consciously to the jagged scar across his cheek.

"You don't look like yourself. I almost didn't recognize you." His father tells him, eyes still darting back and forth across Will's face, as though he's searching desperately for some part he knows. He reaches up, cupping Will's cheek in his rough hands. "You're not the Will I knew, are you?"

Will wonders why it hurts so much - of course he's not the same person he was a year ago - a lot has happened since his father died, and Will's a different person now than he was then. But it's more than that. It's so much more than that. Will knows he's changed in ways he can't even explain, in ways he doesn't want to explain, so he simply shakes his head.

"No, Daddy." He whispers, eyes still stinging.

His father frowns at him. "What's wrong, Will?" He asks gently, thumb brushing away the tears that have spilled down Will's cheek. "What're you cryin' for?"

Will's breath hitches at that. "I-I...I did something bad, Daddy." He confesses.

(What? What does that mean? What's he done?)

"So what?" His father's lips quirk, and he smirks proudly down at Will. "I taught you how to fix almost everything, didn't I? I'm sure you can make it right."

Will bites his lip so hard he tastes blood. "No." He sobs, shaking his head. "I don't think I can. Not this time. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Daddy."

(You know what you've down, the traitorous part of his mind whispers. You know exactly what you've done.)

"Shh," His father says gruffly, drawing him close. "Come here."

Will wails into his shoulder, fingers clutching at the rough fabric of his father's jacket. He needs something to hold on to, something to keep him steady and anchored, because it feels like he's coming undone.

(What is it? What has he done that's so bad?)

"I tried." He tells his father between gasps. "I tried so hard, Daddy. I tried to resist. I tried to be normal. I just wasn't strong enough."

(Like you don't know. Or are you still in denial?)

"You were." His father says to him, his fingers carding through Will's hair. "You were strong for too long." He pauses. "You couldn't hold on forever, son. You're not normal, Will. You never were."

"But I could be -"

"No, you can't." He sounds sad. "You can't be something you aren't, Will. You just can't. Not without destroying yourself in the process."

"I wish I had." Will chokes. "It wouldn't have been better if I had died that night. Better dead than this."

(For fuck's sake, what is he talking about?!)

"Is what you are really such a bad thing?"

"You know it is!"

"Why?"

It's a simple question, one that had a million answers, but for the life of him, Will can't justify a single one. So instead, he simply leans against his father's broad chest and cries. Cries for everything he's done, for the person he once was and could have been and the person he's become. He cries for the innocence he's thrown so carelessly away, and for the way he was and for everything he can't change no matter how hard he fights. He cries until there's nothing left, until his sobs have puttered out to a few ragged gasps, and it's only then that he feels his father finally pull away. The door behind them has drifted further open, and the light spilling through is brighter than it was before.

"Will?" His daddy says, voice soft. "I gotta go now, boy."

"No, please don't leave me." Will begs him, feeling his face begin to crumple all over again at the thought. "I need you."

"I have to, baby." His father tells him, fingers tightening slightly around Will's shoulders. He smiles gently. "It's gonna be okay, Will. I promise. You're gonna be okay. You always were."

He lingers for a moment longer, studying Will's face as though committing it to memory, and then with a final squeeze to Will's shoulders, he steps away, reaching for the door behind him. Will watches him go, still choking on his sobs, and wishing more than anything that he could go with him, but knowing somehow that he can't.

His father pulls open the door. The light from behind it now floods the room, blindingly bright, and Will throws up a hand to shield his eyes, squinting through his fingers at his father's figure. When it finally disappears, he's devastated.

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Will wakes with a gasp, thrashing blindly, but stills when he feels powerful, familiar arms wrap around him from behind and begin to stroke him soothingly.

"Shh." Hannibal murmurs in his ear. "Shh. It's alright, Will. You're alright."

Will pants, and it takes him a moment to realize what must have happened.

They're lying in their bed. The windows are open and the curtains sway lightly in the breeze. Will can taste salt on the air, hear the faint crashing of waves upon the shore. High above, the full moon burns as bright as the sun, watching over them.

Nightmare, Will thinks as he lies there, cradled between the dark silk sheets and Hannibal's low voice. Swallowing down a whimper, he presses closer against Hannibal's warmth, wiping at his eyes as he does. Behind him, he feels Hannibal shift slightly.

"Will?" He asks softly. "Are you awake?"

Will nods, not trusting himself to speak just yet.

"Are you alright?"

"...Yeah." Will whispers back. "Yeah, I'm fine."

He knows Hannibal hears the slight catch when he speaks, knows he recognizes that his voice is thick with more than just sleep, but for once, Hannibal doesn't pry. Instead, he presses a soft kiss to the nape of his neck.

Will shudders at the touch. It feels like a brand.

"Go back to sleep, mylimasis." Hannibal says. "You know you're safe with me."

Will nods again and obediently closes his eyes, let's the quiet calm of Hannibal's presence wash over him.

When they'd first met, Will had been so on edge, so sleep-deprived and worn raw by Jack's frustration, that he hadn't even realized that he couldn't feel anything from Hannibal at all. He'd disliked Hannibal immediately, because Hannibal was a shrink and Will disliked all shrinks on principle, but it wasn't until Hannibal had baited him, analyzed Will so easily, so mockingly, that Will's dislike turned to hatred. He had been so angry that he hadn't even recognized his anger was his own, and it wasn't until later, when they were hunting Garret Jacob Hobbs together, that Will finally noticed silence that surrounded Hannibal. That for the first time in his life, he didn't feel the scratch of someone else's psyche against his own, didn't feel like he was losing himself in someone else.

He should have known then that something was wrong, that he should have been able to pick up something from Hannibal, and should have been disturbed by the fact that he felt nothing at all. But instead, he'd been relieved. Because for the first time in his life, it didn't feel like he was drowning. It didn't feel like the storm of other people's emotions was dragging him under. It felt like he could finally draw air, and buoyed by the quiet Hannibal brought, Will refused to question what it meant. He'd spent his whole life caught in the raging hurricane of what other people felt, had been battered ruthlessly by other people wanted, that now, in Hannibal's eerie calm, Will believed the storm had finally come to pass, never once realizing that the calm was not the end, but merely the eye, and Will was still caught inside while the storm continued to rage all around him.

Of course he had been aware that Hannibal was more than he appeared. There had been moments, little snippets of truth that Hannibal had revealed to Will, lifting the veil just enough for him to catch a glimpse of his true self, half-formed thoughts that itched for his attention and that he stubbornly ignored. He had seen, yes.

But he didn't want to.

And when at last Will could ignore it no longer, when he had finally put the blood-soaked pieces together and he realized exactly what Hannibal was and what he'd done, he'd been enraged. But not at Hannibal - he'd been angry at himself for refusing to accept what he'd known all along. Known all along and simply chosen not to see.

And even after everything that happened, Will had chosen to go back to him. He told himself he was only going back to catch the Ripper, that he was putting himself at Hannibal's feet in order to save lives and that he stood firmly on the side of sanity and goodness. And maybe he

had, at first, but the more time he spent with Hannibal, the real Hannibal, the harder and harder it became to deny how well Will's own jagged edges fit with his. Will had often wondered if what he'd felt was real or simply the product of Hannibal's subtle influence, the way that whispers spoken in a dreamer's ear might worm their way deep inside and twist the images into something else entirely. He was never sure, and when it finally came time for Will to prove himself, to choose once and for all whose side he was on, Hannibal denied him that chance and had left him torn apart on his kitchen floor, Abigail's life slowly bleeding out into his hands.

Even then. Even then, Will had gone after him again. He had planned to kill Hannibal himself, was determined to finally end it once and for all and to take his life back for himself, but the moment he set foot on European soil and began to retrace Hannibal's footsteps, he had known he wouldn't be able to do it. Seeing Hannibal only confirmed it. Even as he was slipping his hand into his pocket, even as he was wrapping his fingers around his knife, even as he was getting ready to plunge the blade in Hannibal's heart, Will had known he wasn't going to be able to do it. He'd swerve at the last moment, change his mind halfway through. And once again the choice was taken from him before he could decide.

How close had he come to dying? At Hannibal's hands, as he pressed the whirling blade of the bone saw against Will's skull, and then later at Muskrat Farm? The agony Hannibal caused him had been incredible, and outdone only by the kiss of Cordell's blade against his face. He had thought for sure he'd die, and Will had been surprised to wake up in his house in Wolf Trap, and he had been surprised when he managed to manipulate Hannibal into surrendering to Jack, and he was surprised to find the victory was hollow. More than anything else, he was surprised that what he felt following Hannibal's arrest wasn't relief, or even satisfaction, but bitter anger. He resented Hannibal for surrendering, for giving Will the chance to choose him again.

Because he had known, hadn't he? That eventually, Will would choose him again and he would choose Hannibal not because he was forced to, but because he wanted to. Hannibal had trusted Will would come to him on his own, and he had.

Just like he always had.

Insanity, Will finds himself thinking, is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result each time.

When the single tear still stubbornly clinging to his lashes finally falls, Will's glad Hannibal can't see it.

There are many ways to define insanity, Will has found over the years. A deviation from normal. The inability to determine reality from fantasy. Repeating behavior with the expectation of a different outcome each time. No one can agree which is best, and none completely manage to completely capture exactly what it means. But it really doesn't matter. Because it seems that despite his best efforts otherwise, Will is insane by every definition that exists.

Isn't he?

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